

Saturday, Feb. 19, 2011

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State Senate OKs bill allowing for third judge

By Michelle Dupler, Herald staff writer

OLYMPIA -- The state Senate on Friday unanimously agreed that Grant County should get an additional district court judge.

The new position is authorized by a bill introduced by Sen. Janea Holmquist Newbry, R-Moses Lake, and approved by the Senate after getting unanimous support by the Senate Judiciary Committee in late January.

"I was happy to go to bat on behalf of our Grant County District Court and county commissioners who requested statutory authorization for the new judge position," Holmquist Newbry said in a news release.

Current law allows Grant County to elect two district court judges, but Holmquist Newbry said that those judges must travel to eight different cities and are subject to 11 different municipal calendars, and two of the district courts are 20 miles apart.

She thought those numbers called for another judge to share the load.

"Grant County citizens have a constitutional right to equal access to the courts and speedy trials," Holmquist Newbry said in the release. "Another judge is sorely needed to help meet the geographical and judicial needs of our county."

Only the Legislature can authorize new district court judges for a county.

A similar measure introduced by Rep. Brad Klippert, R-Kennewick, and adopted by the Legislature in 2009 replaced two Benton County court commissioners with elected district court judges.

A request for new judges also must go through the Administrator for the Courts, under the supervision of the Supreme Court, which then conducts a workload analysis and makes a recommendation to the Legislature, according to a legislative report on Senate Bill 5170.

The administrator found that even though Grant County has two elected judges and a court commissioner, it needs 3.3 judges.

One citizen testified at the public hearing on the bill in January and advised the Judiciary Committee that Grant County should be cautious about taking on the extra costs for another judge.

A fiscal note prepared by the state's Office of Financial Management estimated a third district court judge would cost the county about \$325,000 in 2012, \$651,000 in 2013 and about \$1.3 million per year after that for the judge's salary -- which is set by the state salary commission -- as well as support staff and courtroom space.

The bill now goes to the House for consideration. If approved, it would go into effect 90 days after the end of the legislative session.

Read more: <http://www.tri-cityherald.com/2011/02/19/1377004/state-senate-oks-bill-allowing.html##ixzz1EjhiMqxy>